CHURCH ON CHRISTMAS?

Christmas Day, Sunday, December 25, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 61:1-4
John 1:1-14

In one home I know, a very significant thing happened in the middle of the week. In a two day period the oldest child returned from college; the younger two had school plays and parties requiring special cookies, rehearsals and transportation; the man and woman, both of whom work outside the home, entertained colleagues and employees at back to back parties. On the morning after, the family dog, a wonderful Labrador, was acting very peculiarly. They thought she had eaten something unhealthy, but upon discussion and inquiry among the five of them, made the horrifying discovery that the dog hadn't been fed for two days!

Christmas can do that, I fear - distract us with merry-making so thoroughly that we forget and ignore the necessities. It can and often does simply sieze the agenda, overwhelm us with celebrating.

So - here we are again - on Christmas Day. If it is possible to over-dose on church, some in our company may be close.

"Are you really going to have church on Christmas Day?" I was asked by someone who didn't know that Fourth Presbyterian Church always has church on Christmas Day, even when it doesn't land on Sunday. For seasonal attendees, or those unfamiliar with local custom, it does seem a bit like an ecclesiastical double whammy. After all, if you wanted to and had the stamina, you could have been here for Candlelight Vespers at 5:30 last evening and back at 11:00 for the Festival of Banners and Light. One week ago you could easily have spent all day here for worship, Church School pageant, Messiah-Sing-Along and evening worship. So here we are again... You will certainly be understood and, I would submit, forgiven by God if at this moment you are feeling a little like a baseball fan at a game that has gone into extra innings and it's now the bottom of the 15th, and the game should have ended an hour and a half earlier.. i.e. the activity is still wonderful - pitching, hitting, running and catching but, after all, enough is enough!

Church on Christmas? It is asked most frequently and with the most feeling by those whose whole being has been pointing toward this morning: who couldn't go to sleep last night because of the wonderful excitement and for whom going to church is very much an interruption. They are also the ones who, having conceded the time investment, are likely to ask a follow-up question - "You're not going to preach, are you?"

The news, as is often the case, is both good and bad. The bad news is that, yes, I'm going to preach. The good news is - not for long.

My text and inspiration came from a secular rather than scriptural source... my closest advisor on theological and homiletical matters, whose best advice was this:

"Just tell the story, dear. It's all we want to hear. And then, if there's any time left over, ask everyone to stand up and tell what they got for Christmas, pew at a time, till noon."

As a matter of fact, there is a real dilemma for the preacher on this morning: During Advent we reflect on the meaning of God's coming into the life of the world: we plumb the depths of the best theology we know, and we get to Christmas and find that we have little left to say. It is not only because we have already said so much, although that is clearly part of it, but also because the time for thinking and talking about it is over. The time for singing and celebrating is here.

In my file, for just this occasion, is an essay by Reinhold Niebuhr, A Christmas Service in Retrospect. Niebuhr was a very distinguished scholar, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of this century - a teacher, writer, social critic and, always a preacher. He wrote this essay in 1933 and the Christian Century reprinted it fifty years later. Niebuhr wrote:

"I went to church in the Cathedral on Christmas Day. It is one of the few days of the year on which I am able to attend church without preaching myself. On that day, although a non-conformist myself, I prefer a liturgical church with as little sermon as possible. It is not that I don't like to hear anyone but myself preach. I merely dislike most Christmas and Easter sermons. Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories, and there are not many poets in the pulpit. It is better, therefore, to be satisfied with the symbolic presentation of the poetry in hymns, anthems and liturgy."

So what this preacher does, and I expect I am not alone, is scurry to the file and the bookshelf and read the poetry and the short stories and the essays. It's wonderful; so wonderful in fact that, not being much of a poet, I'm going to indulge myself and share a small sampler with you...

The first is from Charles Dickens - always a good choice at Christmas. This is from a Christmas Chapter in The Pickwick Papers. Mr. Pickwick and friends are about to board a carriage and journey to the country for a family Christmas reunion and wedding. It is very festive. Dickens wrote -

> "And numerous indeed are the hearts to which Christmas brings a brief season of happiness and enjoyment. How many families, whose members have been dispersed and scattered far and wide, in the restless struggle of life, are then reunited, and meet once again in that happy state of companionship and

mutual good-will, which is a source of such pure and unalloyed delight. How many old recollections and how many dormant sympathies does Christmas time awaken!"

One of our best story tellers, with more than a bit of a poetry, is Garrison Keillor, a modern-day Charles Dickens. One of his best essays - actually a monologue from his old radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion" - is about families reunited at Christmas - Dicken's favorite topic. Keillor called it Christmas Dinner, and it is a delight.

"It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon. Christmas. The exiles were home. It was pretty quiet, though you could hear the gritting of teeth, and there was a moment of poisoned silence at the Clarence Bunsen home that rang like a fire bell. Before the blessing, as they sat around the table and admired the work in front of them, a still-life Christmas Dinner by Arlene, before they ate the art, their daughter, Donna, in town from San Diego, said, 'What a wonderful Christmas!' and her husband, Rick, said, 'Well, if the Democrats had their way, it'd be the last one.' Silence.

"Arlene said, that if Rick had his way, the turkeys would be having us. Clarence bowed his head. 'Dear Lord, the giver of all good things, we thank Thee.' He prayed a long prayer, as a ceasefire. Arlene smiled at Rick: 'Have some mashed potatoes.' 'Thank you, Mom.' She winced. He is her son-in-law and she doesn't know why. He is not raising her grandchildren right, he comes to Minnesota and talks too much about the advantages of Southern California, he wears silly clothes, he makes fun of Norwegians, he makes fun of women including his own wife, and he says 'agenda' in place of 'plan' or 'idea' - 'Did you have a different agenda?' he says. 'Let's get our agenda straight.' 'I sense a hidden agenda here.'

"He piled his plate with Christmas agenda and chomped a big bite of it. He said, 'Mom, this is the best dinner I ever ate. I really mean that.' She smiled her brightest smile, the smile she has used all her life on people she'd like to slap silly. She'd like to give him a piece of her mind, but she can't, because he has hostages, her grandchildren. So she kills him with kindness. She stuffs him like a turkey. Fresh caramel rolls for breakfast, a pound of bacon and smoked sausage and scrambled eggs, and two hours later pot roast for lunch and big slabs of banana cream pie. He has gained four pounds since Tuesday. Her goal is twelve. All day he sits dazed by food. 'Fudge bars, Rick? I made them just for you. Here, I'll put the plate right beside you, where you can reach them.' 'Oh Mom...' She's found the crack in his armor, and it's his mouth. His Achilles mouth. Her agenda is stuffing him so he becomes weak and pliable and goes into a calorie coma, and she takes the little boy and the girl for walks and tells them about our great presidents, our great Democratic presidents. 'And did you know they were all Norwegian? Yes, they were, a little bit, on their mother's side, and that little bit was enough to make them great.'" [Leaving Home]

And now my sermon, which has just two brief points.

The first is that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem God planned to address our hearts as well as our minds. God could have done it differently. I have to assume if the purpose was to increase our understanding of ourselves and the world, God could have accomplished that goal by inspiring a philosophy and annointing a great teacher. But by entering history in this way - a tender, very human story about a man and young woman and a new baby born in a stable, God clearly wished to touch something in us besides our brains.

We know that intuitively, I believe. Reinhold Niebuhr, the greatest Christian intellect of his day, wanted poetry, not a well reasoned argument on Christmas. And while I was thinking this one through I recalled that in my home years ago, and many others I knew, watching Midnight Mass on TV from St. Patrick's Cathedral was a regular part of Christmas Eve. My family wouldn't think of going to a Roman Catholic Church - in the flesh. Nevertheless they knew that the mystery of the Incarnation is more adequately celebrated with elaborate ritual, wonderful music and soaring architecture, than in a tight, well reasoned twenty-minute Presbyterian sermon.

So my first point is to suggest that in this birth God is addressing our hearts as well as our minds, and that in so doing God is actually inviting us to trust our hearts a little more; to listen to our emotions as well as our intellects; to go with our feelings as well as our ideas, and to laugh more, weep more, and love a lot more. To take risks for love: to be a little less calculated and reasonable and a little more spontaneous... To be vulnerable for love... And to be more whole and more human.

My second point is that Christmas is about the sacredness of the ordinary. It is about simple things - bearing the presence of the holy God: a man and a woman, a journey, a crowded inn, a birth, a stable, shepherds, the everyday realities of life containing the heart and soul of God. And so all of life looks different because of Christmas. There is no place, no circumstance however modest which is not now the place and circumstance made sacred by God's presence. There is no public issue which may be dismissed by saying it is a political matter and of no concern to religion. This story is about the holy in the everyday: the sacred within the structure of our common life. Christmas means that God's love is present not just around our Christmas trees and family table, but in places where people are poor, oppressed, lonely, sad, afraid and shut out - and in joyful, happy exhilaration. This birth means that there are no people who do not, in some way, represent the divine image of God becoming flesh.

It is so very simple. It is an invitation to remember that simple things often bear the full weight of God's presence, that the ordinary is where God chooses to reveal love.

E. B. White once wrote a Christmas article about an ear trumpet hunters use to hear "the distant music of the hounds." "The miracle of Christmas," he said, "is that, like the distant and very musical voice of the hound, it penetrates finally and becomes heard in the heart..."

And that is my sermon. You didn't come to hear a long treatise on dogma, which Niebuhr said is merely reasonably petrified poetry, nor a pithy analysis of the current world situation.

You came, my advisors assure me, to hear the music and the poetry.

"Just tell the story. That's what we want to hear."

"The word was made flesh and dwelt among us.
And she bore a son and they called his name
Jesus.
And she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and
laid him in a manger.
And suddenly - a multitude of the heavenly
host, praising God and singing,
'Glory to God in the highest, and
on earth peace among all people
with whom God is pleased.'"

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Amen.